

PUBLIC OPINION
KATE DAVIES

“ WITH an academic’s rigour, the detailed facts and figures of Professor John Hills’ report join the dots to prove what many of us already know: council estates are where the poor are concentrated. It’s the debate the report calls for that makes it such a crucial and timely piece of work.

Today, social tenancies are awarded for grim circumstances — homelessness, poverty, single parenthood, disability and disaster. Consequently, estates often contain the poorest people, albeit with a roof over their heads, but with failing schools and inadequate health facilities and few jobs. Tenants have shorter, less satisfying lives and few chances of betterment. The valid if monotonous calls to build more social housing will do little to solve the problems these four million people face. Unless we welcome reform, more social housing could just increase the numbers of people in an abysmal situation.

It has become popular to criticise Hills for raising the issue of tenure reform and rent levels. But we need to get away from one type of housing-based answer for so many different types of people. Social housing should not be seen as a destination but as a springboard to a better life; a place from which people can re-establish themselves, improve their prospects and move forward.

Many tenants remain in social housing for 40 or 50 years. Our customers are an eclectic mix; including older people, single people, large families, young care leavers, teenage mums, solicitors and television executives. While all may have faced a housing crisis in the past, low-cost

rented housing for life on a council estate is not the only or even best answer.

If we can offer attractive alternatives that get people moving through a range of housing — not all of it subsidised — as their situation improves, we will create the vacancies and resources to help people who desperately need it now. Housing those who need it most must surely be the first aim of social housing. Today the most needy are often turned away or offered temporary accommodation.

There is a significant injustice. The rights given by secure or assured tenancy

mean that people who could consider buying their own home, or moving to a cheaper area to find a more suitable, larger home, stay put. Turnover is very low and councils pay up to £50,000 to incentivise people to move on, so that they can let their home to someone in greater need.

A variety of tenancy offers, at a range of price points, is a much better offer. Most people would be happy to pay more to get what they want, if they can afford it. Social housing should be able to charge higher rents to those who want, rather than need, an extra bedroom. We want to be able to offer more appropriate choices to the different people we house.

Punitive measures such as antisocial behaviour orders are not as effective as the threat of losing the tenancy. Here, the family knows from the start that they must behave — it’s a preventative measure. Rolling assured short-term tenancies provide settled homes for families, but give good landlords greater influence to encourage positive social behaviour. We exist to help people in crisis by housing them and supporting them to get their lives back on track. But different people call for different approaches — absolute rights to a subsidised rent for life is the right answer for some people, but should not be dished out universally as if all of us are the same. ”

Kate Davies is the chief executive of Notting Hill Housing Trust



“Housing those who need it most must surely be the first aim of social housing”

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